11-2014

Derrida and Comparative Philosophy

Steven BURIK
Singapore Management University, STEVENBURIK@smu.edu.sg

Published in Comparative and Continental Philosophy, , Volume 6, Issue 2, 1 November 2014, Pages 125-142.
https://doi.org/10.1179/1757063814Z.00000000037

DERRIDA AND COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY

Steven Burik

Singapore Management University

ABSTRACT

This article argues that Derrida's thinking is relevant to comparative philosophy. To illustrate this, at various stages classical Daoism is compared with Derrida's thought, to highlight Derrida's 'applicability' and to see how using Derrida can contribute to new interpretations of Daoism. The article first looks into Derrida's engagement (or lack thereof) with non-Western thought, and then proceed to his extensive work regarding language and translation, comparing this with views on classical Chinese language and translation of key Daoist characters. I then explore Derrida's efforts at opening up philosophy to its outside, and argue that he was very much concerned with other ways of thinking and their possible influence on Western thought. Lastly I argue that Derrida's abiding concern with otherness and alterity forms a fertile background from which to reinvestigate traditional interpretations of classical Daoism, and argue that employing his way of thought can lead us to interesting new perspectives on Daoism.

KEY WORDS: Jacques Derrida, comparative philosophy, Daoism, Chinese philosophy, language

> We stand opposed to whatever would prohibit philosophy from . . . opening itself up to new objects in a way that knows no limit of principle, from recalling that it was already present there where no one wanted to acknowledge it. (Derrida 2004, 170)

This article argues for the relevance of Jacques Derrida's thought for comparative philosophy in two ways. I will first argue that although, to my knowledge, Derrida himself has never made any serious efforts in the discipline of comparative philosophy, we can nevertheless fruitfully employ his way of thinking to further our understanding of comparative philosophy, as well as provide criticism against certain ways of reading philosophical texts from different cultures. In short, I will argue that Derrida's work gives us much to think about when

attempting to do comparative philosophy, and can offer us a more appropriate Western resource with which to approach non-Western philosophical texts, especially when we look at Derrida's work on language and translation, and his focus on 'interdependence' or 'relationality.' Second, and to illustrate Derrida's relevance to comparative philosophy, I will use his thought to compare with classical Daoism, to criticise some of the traditional metaphysical interpretations of the classical Daoist texts and to see how reading Daoism using Derrida's angle clears the way for a non-metaphysical interpretation of Daoism.

Introduction

Given that Derrida is most well-known for criticising the tradition of Western metaphysics and for arguing for the interconnectedness and relationality of what seem to be separate identities at first glance, it is rather surprising that direct references in Derrida's work to non-Western or non-metaphysical philosophy are not only sparse, but problematic and ambiguous in themselves. This is not to say that Derrida's work is not highly 'international.' He has written about South Africa, Algeria, the reception of his work in the United States, and numerous other international issues, both philosophical and political. Yet to my knowledge there is in none of these works any serious approach to or engagement with other cultures and ways of thinking.

This perceived lack might even render it rather inappropriate to speak of Derrida in intercultural perspective. Gayatri Spivak was probably right in the preface to *Of Grammatology*:

> The relationship between logocentrism and ethnocentrism is indirectly invoked in the very first sentence of the 'Exergue.' Yet, paradoxically, and

> almost by a reverse ethnocentrism, Derrida insists that logocentrism is a property of the *West*. He does this so frequently that a quotation would be superfluous. Although something of the Chinese prejudice of the West is discussed in Part I, the *East* is never seriously studied or deconstructed in the Derridean text. (Spivak in Derrida 1976, lxxxii, italics in original)

Apart from some places where Derrida includes his own background and the Middle East in his writings, there are very few mentions of East Asia or other non-Western places or ways of thinking in his extensive oeuvre.[1] To be sure, there are a lot of references to the Islamic world and to his Algerian roots, and Derrida discusses some of the problematics arising from the encounter with these 'other' ways of thought. Yet he always insists on pointing out that the Middle East is not so different from the West, if we can even make these gross distinctions. Derrida has always stressed the common roots of the Abrahamic religions. As such, Derrida has questioned the supposed dichotomy between (the Middle) East and West, by arguing first that the West is diverse in itself and second that what we consider 'other' is not so other as we might superficially think. Derrida has convincingly argued that the dominant philosophical cultures of the regions of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic sphere have much more in common than they differ. For example, in his discussion with Mustafa Chérif, Derrida establishes distinctions within the 'West' between Europe and America, and questions some of the distinctions made between the Islamic and Western world. (see Chérif 2008, 61-66)

However, when we come to the Far East and Chinese philosophy in particular, it is a

[1] Although Derrida has criticized Spivak's reading of his work on Marx, for example in Derrida et al 2008, 222-224, it would indeed seem that nowhere in Derrida's extensive oeuvre is there any sustained engagement with thinking from other-than Western or Judeo-Christian-Islamic cultures, such as we do for example find in Heidegger's works. Although ethnocentrism is sometimes discussed and Derrida never hesitates to state that this ethnocentrism should be overcome, there is no rigorous effort on the part of Derrida to actualise such overcoming in an encounter with different cultures. Derrida is usually content to mention the other-than-Western ways of thinking, and then return to his own project, the deconstruction of Western philosophy. For example, see Derrida 1982, 112-113.

different story. Although Derrida did visit China once, he has never seriously engaged the Chinese philosophical tradition; he does not deconstruct Chinese thought (or any other Asian philosophy for that matter). There are only a few passages where China is mentioned. For example, in *Of Grammatology*, Derrida criticises the idea that Chinese as writing was seen in the earlier Western interpretations as being in an inferior position with regard to Western writing, which, as phonetic, was supposedly closer to the 'phoneme' and thus to real meaning than the largely ideographic Chinese. Derrida challenges this outdated idea by pointing to the fact that "we have known for a long time that largely non-phonetic scripts like Chinese or Japanese included phonetic elements very early." (Derrida 1976, 90) Yet the interesting thing about classical Chinese seems to be that these phonetic elements never overtook its ideogrammatic structure, and as such classical Chinese never developed into the kind of phonetic or alphabetic language we find in the West. This leads Derrida to say that we have in the classical Chinese language "the testimony of a powerful movement of civilization developing outside of all logocentrism." (Derrida 1976, 90) However, he seems content to stop just there, nothing is done with this observation, and it seems as though Derrida continues to treat Chinese as just another way of writing, with the same ideas applying to it. Just as any other sign or sign structure, the Chinese characters can also never function without iterability and without being different from other characters in the system. The Chinese language might be to some extent non-phonetic, but it does not therefore have some privileged access to reality.[2]

When asked whether logocentrism is a Western phenomenon, Derrida answered that:

> logocentric philosophy is a specifically Western response to a much larger necessity which also occurs in the Far East and other cultures, that is, the

[2] See Derrida 1976, 91.

> phonocentric necessity: the privilege of the voice over writing. … But this phonocentric necessity did not develop into a systematic logocentric metaphysics in any non-European culture. Logocentrism is a uniquely European phenomenon. (Derrida in Kearney 1984, 116-117)[3]

Again unfortunately Derrida did not further elaborate upon this statement in this Kearney interview or elsewhere. In *Of Grammatology* it seems that Derrida is not denying the link between phone and writing in Chinese, but that "it is a question of dislocating, through access to another system linking speech and writing [which would be the Chinese system], the founding categories of language and the grammar of the *episteme*." (Derrida 1976, 92, italics in original) This dislocation or disruption of logocentric thought by the idea of non-phonetic writing, or at least of a non-phonetic moment or movement in writing, is an important and returning issue for Derrida, especially in *Of Grammatology*, because such an idea "menaces substantiality, that other metaphysical name of presence and of *ousia*. First in the form of the substantive. Nonphonetic writing breaks the noun apart. It describes relations and not appellations." (Derrida 1976, 26, italics in original) And this is of course reminiscent of différance and its play-structure, the criticisms of both lasting identity and permanent substance behind appearance. What non-phonetic writing then suggests to Derrida is the possibility of a reinterpretation and revaluation of impermanence and interdependence or relationality. This revaluation takes place mostly in Derrida's extensive work on language and is important for comparative philosophy, since in Chinese thought such notions as impermanence, interdependence, and relationality feature prominently.[4]

[3] This point about the universal necessity of phonocentrism is repeated in a 1994 interview (Derrida & Ferraris 2001, 77)

[4] Although I shall mostly be discussing Daoism, the same applies to a large extent to Confucianism. Thus in what follows I beg the reader's patience when mentioning 'Chinese philosophy' and 'Daoism' as if they were one. My argument is about Daoism, but hopefully can be applied to a lot of Chinese philosophy in general.

1. Language, Translation, and Context

One of the most frequently used quotations of Derrida must surely be: "*There is nothing outside of the text*" (Derrida 1976, 158, italics in original), but this is *not* a statement to the effect that we are trapped in language, that we are bound by it, since Derrida understands 'text' as:

> limited neither to the graphic, nor to the book, nor even to discourse, and even less to the semantic, representational, symbolic, ideal, or ideological sphere. What I call "text" implies all the structures called "real," "economic," "historical," socio-institutional, in short: all possible referents. … [E]very referent, all reality has the structure of a differential trace. (Derrida 1988, 148)

With this Derrida is not denying reference, but argues that to think of ourselves as transcendental subjects who could somehow step outside of these referential circles and obtain an objective look at them, is a feature of metaphysical thought that others besides Derrida have also criticised, and it is in this very tradition that Derrida moves.[5] Thus the statement that 'there is nothing outside the text' means rather that there is always context, and this context is both constitutive of our being, as well as structurally open-ended. It is not a fixed context, but as the above quote suggests, Derrida rather sees contextuality as inherent in all textual structures and as such the referential objectivity espoused in metaphysics would become impossible.

Deconstructions begin by showing that context cannot be neatly contained, and to appropriate thinking from different cultures into the traditional Western conceptual

[5] We can think for example of Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger, Levinas, and Gadamer, who have all in different ways argued against the perceived objectivity of strict metaphysics.

frameworks amounts to a futile attempt to contain context. This is especially pertinent in the case of Chinese philosophy, which has as one of its core ideas a form of interdependence or relationality between things. It becomes imperative then that comparative philosophy takes the structurally open-ended contextuality as its basis, and tries to open up its conceptual frameworks to move towards the in-between different ways of thought that such contextuality creates.

Similar concerns surface when we take a closer look at translation, also a major issue in comparative philosophy. The traditional project of philosophy has always presupposed and looked for meaning or truth behind or beyond words, and thus it has had to presuppose translatability, because if there is such a meaning apart from language, any language should in principle be equally able (or unable) to describe it. Traditionally seen, translation thus has to do with the transfer of meaning. Yet Derrida's impact lies exactly in the realisation that such a meaning is never pure, it is influenced or contaminated by language. Although Derrida does of course admit that translations take place, he also denies the ultimate possibility of translation, arguing that he does "not believe that translation is a secondary and derived event in relation to an original language or text." (Derrida in Wood & Bernasconi 1988, 5) Derrida negates the traditional understanding of translation, precisely because he questions the absolute privilege of any original to be translated by some text derivative of it, in a similar way as he challenges the priority of speech over writing and the priority of identity over difference. Neither the 'original' language nor the 'translation' language can aspire to any pure meaning. So the notion of translation as the simple transfer of a univocal meaning from one language to another becomes problematic and needs to be rethought:

> …a notion of *transformation* must be substituted for the notion of translation:
> a regulated transformation of one language by another, of one text by another.

> We shall not have and never have had to deal with some "transfer" of pure signifieds that the signifying instrument—or "vehicle"—would leave virgin and intact, from one language to another, or within one and the same language. (Derrida 1981, 31, italics in original)

'Transformation' is more appropriate as a word for the process Derrida is describing because it captures two aspects which 'translation' fails to capture. First, because transformation implies that there is no original and derivative, both texts can be eternally transformed by reading, there is an open-endedness to both. Second, transformation captures the fact of the radical 'violence' of every translation, in that it always is something different from what is translated; as a matter of necessity it transforms instead of merely transfers the 'original.'

With this questioning of the status of what is traditionally seen as the 'original' text, Derrida is not so much denying that there is one text which is translated or transformed into another, but he is questioning the way the relation between these texts is traditionally perceived. He questions the idea that the 'original' would mean anything *outside* of or *without* its (ever expanding) context, which consists precisely of its interpretations and translations. He thus argues that:

> the so-called original is in a position of demand with regard to the translation. The original is not a plenitude which would come to be translated by accident. The original is in the situation of demand, that is, of a lack or exile. The original is indebted a priori to the translation. Its survival is a demand and a desire for translation… (Derrida 1985, 152)[6]

[6] Elsewhere Derrida also refers to the necessity of translation for the survival and continuation of the original text. For example, in "Des Tours de Babel" in *Acts of Religion* (Derrida 2002b), Derrida says: "The original is the first debtor, the first petitioner; it begins by lacking and by pleading for translation." (118) And further on: "If the translator neither restitutes nor copies an original, it is because the original lives on and transforms itself.

Thus, one could speculate that such a survival through the demand of the original for translation could be seen as the inevitable and continuing *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the 'original' and that this 'original' itself would be part of such a *Wirkungsgeschichte*. Again we see that Derrida challenges the idea of a fullness or completeness of any identity (the text to be translated), and insists on this identity being relative to difference and interpretation (the text translated and as such, living).

An awareness of this inevitable aspect of transformation of every translation should not reduce us to a relativism, but make us see that although a different conceptual framework is almost certainly necessary when translating texts from a different cultural background, the use of such frameworks should be closely monitored and scrutinised to see how well it fits the known dominant cultural sensibilities of the text to be translated. In simpler words, it is indeed the case that all translation is interpretation, but certain conceptual frameworks are less appropriate to translate sensibilities from for example the classical Chinese philosophical texts, since such frameworks import or imply a worldview known to be largely irrelevant or not importantly present in the classical Chinese culture. Roger Ames and David Hall, in their numerous collaborations, have argued convincingly that an uncritical use of the conceptual framework of Western philosophy to translate Chinese classics inevitably leads to a distortion of the way the classical Chinese thinkers perceived their world, the context in which these classics arose.

So the real problem for comparative philosophy is not that every translation is a transformation or interpretation, but that this interpretation "does not begin … with what is commonly called translation. It begins as soon as *a certain type of reading* of the 'original' text is *instituted*." (Derrida 2004, 19, italics added) *How* we read is what causes certain

---

The translation will truly be a moment in the growth of the original, which will complete itself in enlarging itself." (121)

interpretations to flourish and others to wither. Taking this problem to comparative philosophy it would seem that our ideas of communication and language are not neutral, but might nevertheless appear or be presented as such. There is no neutral or meta-language, since "philosophy finds its element in so-called natural language. It has never been able to formalize itself integrally in an artificial language despite several fascinating attempts to do so in the history of philosophy." (Derrida 1995, 225) In comparative philosophy one set or kind of these natural languages, the Western metaphysical one, has until recently always presented itself as the model to which other languages have to concur or aspire. Speaking of 'public communication' Derrida has thus warned us that:

> Such a discourse tends to impose a model of language that is supposedly favourable to this communication. Claiming to speak in the name of intelligibility, good sense, common sense, or the democratic ethic, this discourse tends, by means of these very things, and as if naturally, to discredit anything that complicates this model. (Derrida 1992, 55)

Ways of thinking that are not easily incorporated into the dominant model might then easily be excluded on the basis of lacking certain criteria, and we should be aware that it is our Western metaphysical languages and way of thinking that have imposed and instituted those criteria. Derrida is extremely aware of this dissymmetry, and thus of the difficulties of translation, and of the seemingly impossible "necessity in fact of making cohabit in a same text or of grafting codes, motifs, registers, voices that are heterogeneous" (Derrida 1995, 375), which for my current purposes I read as coming from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

In the rest of this section, I will argue that the ingrained categories of Western

metaphysics are challenged by the Chinese language structure, not so much because Chinese writing does not have a link to speech, but because this link seems structurally different and therefore does not admit of the radical prioritising of speech over writing or of seeing writing as a defective derivative of speech. In this context it is worthwhile to look at some interpretations of classical Chinese by contemporary philosophers. Henry Rosemont Jr. and Roger Ames argue that:

> classical Chinese is not now and may never have been understood aloud as a primarily spoken language; therefore spoken and literary Chinese are now and may always have been two distinct linguistic media, and if so, the latter should clearly not be seen as simply a transcription of speech. (Ames & Rosemont 1998, 38-39)

Classical Chinese differs significantly from the linguistic ideal of Indo-European languages, in that it cannot be understood (exclusively) by seeing it as a transcription of the spoken language, whereby the pure presence denoted by the spoken word is transported (in a deficient way) into the written word. According to Roger Ames and David Hall this means that classical "Chinese language is not logocentric. Words do not name essences. Rather, they indicate always-transitory processes and events." (Hall & Ames 2001, 16) And Chad Hansen, another prominent Chinese philosophy scholar, has argued that we just deny the bias towards speech and see (the classical Chinese) language in its totality (that is both speech and writing) as:

> an abstract symbolic system. Sounds are *one familiar example* of linguistic symbols, not their essence. Pictures, gestures, electromagnetic modulations,

> graphs, map conventions, eyebrow movements, ideographs, logical notation and so forth are other possible symbol systems that can token words of a language. (Hansen 1992, 37, italics in original)

These views on language are important to the project of comparative philosophy, since it is in language that intercultural encounters take place,[7] and Derrida seems to be suggesting that Western conceptuality is not suitable for such encounters:

> What then, is this encounter with the absolutely-other? Neither representation, nor limitation, nor conceptual relation to the same. … [T]he concept (material of language), which is always *given to the other*, cannot encompass the other, cannot include the other. (Derrida 2001, 117, italics in original)

Although this quote is about Levinas' ideas of the absolutely other, we can extrapolate this to intercultural encounters. If the Chinese language and worldview are relevantly different from that of the West, and if Western conceptuality is inappropriate for such an intercultural encounter with the philosophy of classical China, we should find some examples of how this conceptuality distorts the other culture's way of thought. Luckily (or rather unfortunately) we have many such examples in the Western translations of certain characters pivotal to the classical Chinese way of thought. Characters such as *dao* 道 have traditionally been translated with the substantive noun 'Way', capitalised in order to create the idea of a metaphysical principle equal to 'Reason', or even 'God.' But *dao* also means a host of other things, including 'guiding discourse' and 'speaking.'[8] Choosing this one translation over any

[7] Not just in written language, but even more so in language in a broad sense, when we take Derrida's idea of 'writing,' as encompassing all sign structures of signification, as a substitute for language.
[8] For a good gloss of the richness of the notion *dao* see Hall and Ames 2003, 57-59.

other possibility thus incorporates a metaphysics that the Chinese thinkers may not have shared. A similar thing has happened to the character *tian* 天, usually translated as 'Heaven.' It is only quite recently that the realisation has set in that such a translation imports a whole world of religious sentiments largely unfamiliar to the classical Chinese.[9] As a last example, the character *xin* 心 has always been translated as 'mind', incorporating as such the mind-body dualism that is largely absent from Chinese philosophy. The character *xin* 心 is actually more a representation of the aorta, so 'heart' would be more appropriate, especially when we know that for the classical Chinese the heart was considered the seat of thinking. Nowadays the not so pretty but effective 'heart-mind' is often used, which at least does not lead us to import the mind-body distinction into Chinese thought.

More importantly, from these short examples we can see that by applying our own categories and conceptuality, we not only distort the meaning of certain words, but in the process import an entirely different way of thinking into the Chinese classics. It could be suggested that applying a conceptual framework is inevitable. Although this is true, it would not be the case that every conceptual framework or interpretation is as good as the next one. Those frameworks and interpretations that reflect the situation at hand best are those that are obviously better than the ones that do not reflect it. In the Chinese worldview, meaning is situational and relational and is developed 'from the inside' by metaphorically relating the situation to similar ones, and thus meaning cannot easily be abstracted, but is always contextual. More importantly, the Chinese philosophical outlook sees the world in a process way, where things are not static and isolatable, but are contextual events that have no fixed beginning and end, but are rather part of a web of interconnected happenings. As such the largely metaphysical Western framework with its focus on abstraction, identification, and classification, seems indeed inappropriate.

[9] See Hall and Ames 1998.

In *Limited Inc.* Derrida explains the profound contextuality or relationality inherent in his thought by saying "that nothing exists outside context …, but also that the limit of the frame or the border of the context always entails a clause of non-closure. The outside penetrates and thus determines the inside." (Derrida 1988, 152-153) Thus context itself is not only constitutive of any identity, but as context it can never be closed off, it is structurally and inherently open. Naming it 'the' context would even be wrong, as this could still suggest a closed context with an identifiable content. Similarly, translating *dao* as 'the Way' ignores the fact that *dao* is largely processual, and in a way it is similar to context, of which Derrida says it is nothing more or less than "the entire 'real-history-of-the-world.'" (Derrida 1988, 136) In this regard *dao* is like context as chapter 62 of the *Daodejing* says that "Way-making (*dao*) is the flowing together of all things (*wanwu*)." (Hall & Ames 2003, 173, pinyin in original)

So when comparative philosophy is not well served by referring to the metaphysical conceptual frameworks, it is necessary to enlarge the philosophical discourse. This is what Derrida has attempted in numerous ways, as he is interested in freeing thinking from what has become the too stringent metaphysical and analytical philosophy. He cares "about… a 'thinking,' let's say, that is not confined within the particular way of thinking that is philosophy or science. There are forms …, there are perhaps "pensées" that are more thinking than this kind of thinking called philosophy." (Derrida 1995, 202, French in original) This move reminds us of Heidegger's statement that there might be "greater thinkers" (Heidegger 1963, 24) outside of Western philosophy. Derrida's deconstructions entail a thinking which is no longer purely philosophical, or it is differently philosophical, in that it questions the traditionally philosophical from various standpoints which are themselves not necessarily philosophical in the traditional sense. Such deconstructions are "perhaps no longer scientific or philosophical, in the sense in which these words can be determined today. It is in fact this

indetermination and this very opening that we designate … by the word "thinking."" (Derrida 2004, 202-203)

I would suggest that one of the functions of comparative philosophy is similar, in that in and through its comparisons it questions the standard conceptions, interpretations and explanations that traditional Western metaphysics has offered, from a place in-between different philosophical traditions, and that means first of all that culturally different paradigms of thinking need to be confident that their ideas will not be appropriated by traditional Western metaphysics, and second that the relationality between different philosophical traditions be reconsidered.

Given these imperatives it has been thought by many that comparative philosophy is quite literally 'impossible.' The fact that the traditional conceptual frameworks from the West and China are so different, or that it may not even be possible to speak of 'conceptual framework' when discussing the Chinese language and thought, has persuaded many that 'real' intercultural dialogue is impossible, since the conceptual frameworks are too different. The only way comparative philosophy seems to be possible is if we willingly see its impossibility. Let me explain this: we must admit that different conceptual frameworks such as the Western metaphysical and the classical Chinese are in a way incompatible. As we saw in the translation part of this article, we are always transforming rather than transferring. However, awareness of this impossibility of pure transfer need not preclude any comparative efforts. First of all, such efforts are there, and continue to yield interesting and insightful comparisons. The fact that they do not achieve such a pure transfer is only a problem if one thinks of philosophy as a pure and objective endeavour, as traditional metaphysics has done. Second, and connected to this, there may be other conceptual frameworks that are more appropriate to the cultural sensibilities of classical Chinese thought. One such framework could be the one that stresses a non-metaphysical, process way of thinking.

2. Interdependence, Relationality and the Process World

Derrida has argued that things are never as neatly containable as the metaphysical approach would want. This observation can be translated into the necessity for our dominant, but limited way of thinking to seek discourse with different ways of thinking (be they Eastern or Western in origin). Indeed, this necessity can be read throughout Derrida's work, which is precisely concerned with boundaries, limits, limitations and with their artificiality, and argues incessantly for the traversal and disruption of these limits. First of all we have seen there is the sense of disruption which we see in the fact that nothing is ever so full and complete as it might present itself. Secondly Derrida takes this idea of traversal as a kind of deconstructive imperative. So he observes not just the inevitability of the first kind of traversal, but closely connected to this argues for the *necessity* of philosophy to go beyond its own limits, "toward the encounter with other types of knowledge, discourse, writing." (Derrida 1995, 376) It is only by going *through* what is 'other' that thinking works. The traditional universalistic tendencies in Western philosophy could then be seen as having denied or belittled the necessity of this encounter. Derrida argues that the Euro- or ethnocentrism involved in a lot of what is called philosophy should be challenged both from within and from without, and argues for an approach to other forms of thought that would go beyond the usual oppositional structure of Eurocentric\non-Eurocentric. (Derrida 2002a, 336-338)

Derrida's work is thus important for comparative philosophy, as it challenges preconceived notions of truth, reference, identity and wholeness or completeness, thus opening the way for a new understanding of relationality and difference. But as we have seen, Derrida's challenges were largely 'from within', whereas in comparative philosophy we can find a challenge 'from without.' Geoffrey Bennington has observed that for Derrida, "[t]he

point … is not to reintegrate remains into philosophy, but … to introduce a radical nondialectisable alterity into the heart of the same." (Derrida & Bennington 1993, 291) This means Derrida was implicitly aware of the necessity of giving comparative thinking a recognised space. The 'incursions,' 'invasions,' 'disruptions,' translation problems etc. from outside of philosophy into its field 'proper,' need to be addressed by philosophy, not by closing itself off from what is considered other to it, but by opening up to these different ways of thought.

This same point is driven home when Derrida argues that deconstruction as a discipline does not really exist. Instead, he says, there are deconstructions,[10] indicating that these are site-specific. This means that Derrida argues that any strict methodology would beforehand be closed off to the situational aspect of each new engagement. As he says, it would reduce deconstruction(-s) to "an available set of rule-governed procedures, methods, accessible approaches." (Derrida 2007, 15) In comparative philosophy there is still the (maybe traditionally Western) wish to come up with one method, theory, or methodology of comparative philosophy. By employing Derrida's thoughts, we should rather let this wish go and focus on the individual encounters and comparisons without imposing a fixed, preconceived idea of what comparative philosophy should be.

This leads us back to the already briefly mentioned notion of (the) 'other' or alterity in Derrida's work, a difficult but persistent theme.[11] The problem with the other seems to be how it can possibly have any effect on the self, since if it is considered as the other of language, then it is also the other of all our reference structures, and thus would be inaccessible, i.e. impossible. Derrida has even said: "Every other is completely other." (Derrida 1993, 22) We seem to be back at the relativist position that says that comparative philosophy is impossible. Yet what is 'other' might always escape our efforts at appropriation,

[10] See for example Derrida in Lotringer & Cohen 2001, 15.
[11] See J. Hillis Miller 1996.

but at the same time otherness, difference, seems constitutive of our being while remaining ever singular and evasive. The relevance for comparative thinking is that what is other is never really so radically other as not to allow some sort of communication or encounter, yet this encounter can never take the form of appropriation.

I take Derrida to mean with the 'other' that this 'other' is then not something we can summon in nor into our language, our conceptuality; it is rather something which has to come of its own, "[y]et it is necessary to prepare for it; to allow the coming of the entirely other, passivity, a certain kind of resigned passivity for which everything comes down to the same, is not suitable. Letting the other come is not inertia ready for anything whatever." (Derrida 2007, 39) This reminds us immediately of Heidegger's *Gelassenheit. Gelassenheit* is not a passive attitude; it is an active opening up of your own thought structures which is necessary for other ways of thinking to find an entrance. Derrida argues for a similar attitude, a responsible opening. The difference with Heidegger could be that it is actually deconstruction(s) which provide such possible openings. Thus the space created by opening up our thought structures, by deconstructing what is supposedly an identity, is what makes any intercultural encounter between the self and the other possible.

Alterity and outside are not to be subsumed under traditional philosophical categories, they are to remain outside so as to upset the comfort of the inside. They are however necessarily part of the larger thinking discourse, and should be given the space to develop 'on their own terms.' In Daoism, this is similarly perceived in terms of spontaneity and non-interference with the way the world is. The Daoist terminology of *ziran* 自然 (spontaneity, so-of-itself) and *wuwei* 無為 (non-assertive action) seeks to express this attitude of openness and respectful responsiveness to the world that we also see in Derrida.

3. A Derridean Approach to Daoism

My point in this last section is largely illustrative. I only wish to establish that it is very much possible to take a Derridean, differential or non-dualistic approach to Daoism, and that doing so is not (just) imposing Derrida's standards on the Daoist tradition (at least not more so than 'normal' interpretations impose their metaphysical ideas on them), but is a better reflection of the Daoist sensibilities. Such a non-metaphysical interpretation can, as I will show, (also) be read in the texts (and in differing commentaries and interpretations) themselves, in the ambiguity or equivocality, or polysemy (dissemination) of the 'concepts' that are found in Daoism.

We saw that in Daoism, with its process character, meaning has to arise, not from some outside metaphysical principle, but from within the process, and hence the insistence and focus on relationality. Meaning here arises from context. The structure of the classical Chinese language seems to play at least a part in this. The traditional Western temptation has always been to absolutise in a logocentric manner the 'ideas' and 'concepts' of East Asian traditions (an example we saw being *The Dao* in capital letters translated as 'The Way' according to the reifying and 'substance-thinking' Western standards) and this temptation is apparent both in Western and subsequent Asian readings and interpretations of the Daoist tradition.

The resistance against this kind of reading could be a match between Derrida and classical Daoism. With regard to Daoism this would mean that *dao* is not some metaphysical principle, but it is rather the structures *of* relationality, *of* context. This kind of thought can be read in the *Zhuangzi*: Zhuangzi, upon realising he is himself entangled in a web of creatures preying upon each other, says that "[i]t is inherent in things that they are ties to each other, that one kind calls up another." (Graham 2001, 118) Zhuangzi thereby assents to the fact that he is a situational being. Graham's translation here might at first seem odd, as he translates

not that things *have* ties with other things, but that things *are* these ties. This translation however makes it even clearer that relationality is prior to identity.

Consulting Derrida's work on translation can help us make more sense of the fact that there is really no one meaning to the original Daoist classics, but that meaning only arises out of interpretations, something which the actual *Wirkungsgeschichte* or evolution of the Daoist texts through their commentaries and interpretations endorses. We have known for a long time that the Daoist classics are not one-author works but rather compilations of multiple sources, and that their final appearance is the result of a long process of coming to be through various permutations and interpretations, where later commentators would sometimes literally insert their own comments into the text they were commenting on.

A Derridean reading would consist in different translation strategies, where a term like *dao* will not get translated as "The Way," but for example, as done by Roger Ames and David Hall, as "way-making" (Hall & Ames 2003), indicating a non-metaphysical process thinking in Daoism rather than a substance thinking. We could then proceed to reinterpret classical Daoism, i.e. the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi*, according to these different understandings of their background assumptions. Characters such as *tian* 天, *ziran* 自然, *wuwei* 無為, *xin* 心, which are very important in Daoism, would also have to be translated differently, something Ames and Hall consequently do.[12]

To illustrate the compatibility between Derrida and Daoism I would like to focus on the notion of 'trace.' Derrida employs many terms with regard to this 'trace' thinking, which have definite parallels to *dao*, if read as way-making. In this context 'breaching' (*Bahnung* (German) or *Frayage* (French)) is important in Derrida's thought. 'Spacing' and 'supplement' are other terms used here. In my view these terms stand for the play of otherness, of differences, that which no longer belongs to presence, and has no real origin or source.

[12] See Hall & Ames 2003, 39, 55-71.

Derrida calls this play of *différance* temporisation,[13] implicitly bringing attention to the 'deferral' aspect of his thought. Presence is always deferred, traces are all we have. The trace for Derrida is that which is "[a]lways differing and deferring, the trace is never as it is in the presentation of itself. It erases itself in presenting itself, muffles itself in resonating…" (Derrida 1982, 23) Trace(s) are thus not to be understood as traces of something deeper or behind the appearances of the trace(s): "the trace is not a presence but the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates itself, displaces itself, it properly has no site—erasure belongs to its structure." (Derrida 1982, 24) The fact that *différance* is "the play which makes possible nominal effects, the relatively unitary and atomic structures that are called names," (Derrida 1982, 26) does not mean that there is something outside of this play that would function as a metaphysical guiding principle. The play is all there is.

When *dao* is seen in this way, we can no longer refer to *dao* as a principle, since that notion already implies that there is something guiding something else, before something else, a presence before the trace. To explain this we could look at chapter 62 of the *Daodejing*, which says that "Way-making (*dao*) is the flowing together of all things (*wanwu*)." (Hall & Ames 2003, 173, pinyin in original) This passage implies a process thinking which is comparable with Derrida's trace thinking, since there is nothing behind the flowing together of things, meaning first of all that there is no guiding principle behind it, and second that all things flow together in the sense that they have traces in each other. There are only traces. Other chapters of the *Daodejing* can be read in a similar fashion. Chapter 1 mentions that *dao* is ineffable, but this is not because it would be some metaphysical principle, but because as the whole of everything 'flowing together', it cannot be given a name without reducing it to something within that flow. Chapter 4, 6 and 14 describe *dao* as elusive, as only seemingly there, validating the idea that there is no getting beyond the traces. Further in chapter 21 a

[13] For example in Derrida 1982, 8.

similar position is taken:

> As for the process of way-making,
> It is ever so indefinite and vague.
> Though vague and indefinite,
> There are images within it.
> Though indefinite and vague,
> There are events within it. (Hall & Ames 2003, 107)

A metaphysical interpretation of this passage would suggest that behind the appearances which are vague and indeterminate, there is a real presence, a sort of Platonic world of principles. Reading with Derrida, I see this passage as meaning that within context, only differences function and thus only traces are to be found. The context itself is nothing else than this play of differences, but *within* that context there are indeed references or images. These references or images however never refer to that full presence suggested by the metaphysical tradition.

In the *Zhuangzi* chapter 2 states something comparable. Where everything has a "this" and a "that," full presence is repudiated and the way is opened for an understanding that focuses on traces. As Zhuangzi says:

> There is a beginning. There is a not yet beginning to be a beginning. There is a not yet beginning to be a not yet beginning to be a beginning. There is being. There is nonbeing. There is a not yet beginning to be nonbeing. There is a not yet beginning to be a not yet beginning to be nonbeing. Suddenly there is being and nonbeing. But between this being and nonbeing, I don't really know

which is being and which is nonbeing. (Watson 2003, 38)

The play of *yin* and *yang* forces important in Daoism suggests that otherness is always already there. *Yin* is always *yin* becoming *yang*, and vice versa. There is a continuous process, hence we cannot perceive things other than as infinite traces only identifiable within or through an ever increasing context. Before the 'beginning' there is another 'beginning', and so on. Thus 'beginning' never really refers to some metaphysical principle that started the process, but can only make sense from within the process. Outside and inside then become categories which are no longer strictly separable. Graham describes this thought in a persuasive manner: "Perhaps *Lao-tzu*'s Way is how the Trace will look to us when we are no longer haunted by the ghost of that transcendent Reality the death of which Derrida proclaims." (Graham 1989, 228, italics in original)

This leads us to the question about the permanence or impermanence of *dao*. In Daoism the process of change takes precedent over any permanent order. Of course some patterns endure for a while, there is some permanence to these, yet more importantly the focus is on the impermanence of *daos*. This applies specifically to the relation of man to the world, because it is exactly man who seems to forget this impermanence. As Graham notices: "It is all right to make fluid distinctions varying with circumstances, it is when we make rigid distinctions misleading us into judging that something is permanently what it is temporarily convenient to name it that thinking goes wrong." (Graham 1989, 190) Both Derrida and Daoism thus maintain the provisionality of our thought and our language, without that leading them to be against thinking and language per se. For example, in many Western interpretations of Daoism it is often argued that Daoists in general and Zhuangzi in particular, because they understand that language is impermanent, propose to do away with language, but I think this is a misunderstanding. One of the passages often invoked in this argument is:

> The fish trap exists because of the fish; once you've gotten the fish, you can forget about the trap. The rabbit snare exists because of the rabbit; once you've gotten the rabbit, you can forget the snare. Words exist because of meaning; once you've gotten the meaning, you can forget the words. Where can I find a man who has forgotten words so I can have a word with him? (Watson 2003, 141)

This passage from the *Zhuangzi* has traditionally and metaphysically been understood as saying that we can do without language once we rise to the level of the meaning of ideas. Yet from a Derridean perspective we would rather understand this passage as saying we must *always* return to language, even when we think we no longer need it. You can only forget the fish trap for a short moment, while you have fish. Once the fish runs out, is exhausted, you need the fish trap again, and you might have to do some repairs as well. And the final sentence portrays this idea very clearly: "Where can I find a man who has forgotten words so I can have a word with him?" You need first to forget about words as having a fixed reference, not to leave them behind permanently, but to be able to use them differently. Derrida's idea of the '*under erasure*', the provisional use of notions, and his insistence on inventing new terms and using terms in different ways for a while, and then seemingly letting them go, can thus be fruitfully compared to this Daoist insistence of the non-permanence of meaning. For example, Derrida has little affinity with the concept 'deconstruction', and argues that this word should be seen as provisional and "determined by such other words as 'ecriture,' 'trace,' 'differance,' 'supplement,' 'hymen,' 'pharmakon,' 'marge,' 'entame,' 'parergon,' etc. By definition, the list can never be closed…" (Derrida in Wood & Bernasconi 1988, 4) Once a neologism or a word develops into a concept, it loses what original force it

had, and the same would go for the notion of *dao*. Daoists are indeed extremely aware of the provisionality of language, examples abound where they talk about the impossibility of pinpointing *dao,* but that does not mean they want to get rid of language. It means foremost that Derrida and the Daoists are aware that literal language does not exist, that all language is metaphorical in a way, and that reference is provisional.

Like Derrida, Zhuangzi is aware that words are needed although they resist our ambitions to fix their meanings. Derrida and Zhuangzi both acknowledge the constant shifts and the need to be skilful in playing with this phenomenon of language. As Graham says, Zhuangzi "uses words not like a philosopher but like a poet, sensitive to their richness, exploiting their ambiguities, letting conflicting meanings explode against each other in apparent contradiction." (Graham 2001, 26) The point both Zhuangzi and Derrida make is not that language is useless and to be discarded, but that we must see and accept its ultimate possibilities and thus to reconsider its normal usage. This is exemplified by Zhuangzi saying: "Where can I find a man who has forgotten words, so I can have a word with him?" By letting words 'explode' against each other, by exploiting the fullest range of meanings of any term, by bringing out ambiguities and inconsistencies, Derrida and Daoism advocate a use of language that seeks to explore it to its fullest possibilities, and this with full awareness of its dangers and limitations, rather than discard it.

For Derrida, language, or 'writing', is an essential part of how we experience the world. We have seen that Derrida's "nothing outside the text" means that our lives revolve around open-ended contexts and signification structures. As such we are relational at our core and revolve around 'language' or 'discourse.' Ames has put this point with regard to Chinese philosophy:

> we are nothing more or less than the ongoing and sedimenting aggregate of

> these various levels of discourse: what we say and hear, what our countenances express and how it affects others, what our formal behaviors communicate and what they precipitate, what our body language and gestures indicate and how they are interpreted, what our voices and songs convey and how others are prompted to respond to them. As such, we are the organisms that in our doings and undergoings emerge discursively out of these performances of ourselves in community. (Ames 2008, 45)

We saw that *Zhuangzi* says that things "are ties to each other," meaning that everything is related in differential webs, and that language is also such a web, existing only because of and by this relationality. Like Derrida, the strategic provocations employed by Zhuangzi are not about the total meaninglessness of words but about the mistake of assigning dogmatically fixed meanings. Essentially, both Derrida and Zhuangzi are aware that there is no way they can ever permanently escape the workings of language, and they accordingly challenge the inflexibility of the ways of thinking in which they were brought up.

This short 'application' of Derrida's thought is not meant to be exhaustive, but serves purely as an example of the usefulness of employing Derrida in comparative philosophy.

Concluding Remarks

To summarize, we could say the following about Derrida and comparative philosophy. First, it is obvious that it is in his work, and not so much in any actual intercultural encounter between himself as a thinker and another cultural sphere, that any relevance is to be found. And this requires very close reading and a constant awareness of the difficulties and implications of what comparative philosophers try to achieve, as well as an awareness that we

are almost always reading 'out of context.'

Second, we can use his work for an intercultural understanding by comparing his way of thinking with other cultures, if we stay aware of the fact that for Derrida, the words and concepts he employs are not 'transcendental signifieds' in any way, and that as such, they ultimately have no value and are therefore used 'under erasure.' Derrida can make us aware of the problems surrounding conceptual frameworks and their unavoidable employment in comparative philosophy.

Third, that much of Derrida's work revolves around dealing with such aporias. But he does not deal with them in the sense that Western philosophy has always done, by denying them their place and pushing them to the margins of philosophy, but by showing how we continuously *have* to deal with them, with the contamination and infusion of what is other into what is considered the self. This ambiguity is not a bad thing, it is the possibility for not closing off our understanding to things different, and it is always there. Derrida then tries to think relationality, the in-between. Not avoiding this ultimate relationality, but giving full justice to it, is also what comparative philosophy is about, and it is thus that a close reading of Derrida can help comparative thinking in how to approach thinking in other cultures.

Lastly, 'applying' Derrida to a different way of thought, in this case classical Daoism, might yield fruitful results in that it gives us better tools to set aside the usual metaphysical lenses we have.[14]

References

Ames, Roger T. & Rosemont, Henry, Jr. 1998. *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation.* New York: Ballantine Books.

[14] This article was written while the author held a lecturer position at SIM University (UniSIM) in Singapore. The author would like to thank UniSIM for its support.

Ames, Roger T. 2008. “Paronomasia: a Confucian Way of Making Meaning.” In: *Confucius Now: Contemporary Encounters with the Analects.* Edited by David Jones, La Salle IL: Open Court.

Brannigan, John & Robbins, Ruth & Wolfreys, Julian (eds.). 1996. *Applying: To Derrida.* London: Macmillan Press.

Chérif, Mustapha. 2008. *Islam and the West: a Conversation with Jacques Derrida.* Translated by Teresa Lavender Fagan. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

Derrida, Jacques. 1976. *Of Grammatology.* Translated by G.C. Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

_____. 1981. *Positions*. Translated by Alan Bass. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

_____. 1982. *Margins of Philosophy.* Translated by Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

_____. 1985. *The Ear of the Other.* Edited by Christie McDonald, translated by Peggy Kamuf. Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press.

_____. 1988. *Limited Inc.* Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

_____. 1992. *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today’s Europe.* Translated by P. Brault and M. Naas. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

_____. 1993. *Aporias.* Translated by Thomas Dutoit. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

_____. 1995. *Points…, Interviews, 1974-1994.* Edited by Elisabeth Weber, translated by Peggy Kamuf and others. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

_____. 2001. *Writing and Difference.* Translated by Alan Bass. London & New York: Routledge.

_____. 2002a. *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews 1971-2001*. Translated by Elizabeth Rottenberg. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

_____. 2002b. *Acts of Religion*. Edited by Gil Anidjar, various translators. New York: Routledge.

_____. 2004. *Eyes of the University: Right to Philosophy 2.* Translated by Jan Plug. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

_____. 2007. *Psyche: Inventions of the Other, Volume I.* Edited by Peggy Kamuf & Elizabeth Rottenberg. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

_____ & Bennington, Geoffrey. 1993. *Jacques Derrida.* Translated by G. Bennington. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

_____ & Ferraris, Maurizio. 2001. *A Taste for the Secret*. Translated by Giacomo Donis. Cambridge: Polity Press.

_____ & Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson, Antonio Negri et al. 2008. *Ghostly Demarcations: a Symposium on Jacques Derrida's* Specters of Marx. Edited by Michael Sprinker. London and New York: Verso.

Graham, A. C. 1989. *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China*. La Salle IL: Open Court.

_____. 2001. *Chuang-Tzu: The Inner Chapters.* Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.

Hall, David L. & Ames, Roger T. 1998. *Thinking from the Han: Self, Truth, and Transcendence in Chinese and Western Culture*. Albany: SUNY Press.

_____. 2001. *Focusing the Familiar: A Translation and Philosophical Interpretation of the* Zhongyong. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

_____. 2003. *Daodejing, Making This Life Significant.* New York: Ballantine Books.

Hansen, Chad. 1992. *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought.* Hong Kong: Oxford University Press.

Heidegger, Martin. 1963. *Was ist das- die Philosophie?* Pfullingen: Günther Neske.

Hillis Miller, J. 1996. "Derrida's Others." In: Brannigan et al. 1996, 153-170.

Kearney, Richard. 1984. *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Lotringer, Sylvère & Cohen, Sande (eds). 2001. *French Theory in America.* New York & London: Routledge.

Watson, Burton. 2003. *Zhuangzi: Basic Writings.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Wood, David & Bernasconi, Robert (eds). 1988. *Derrida and Différance.* Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

Send correspondence to Steven Burik, stevenburik@smu.edu.sg